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AUTHOR Williams, Richard; Preston, Bradley
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ABSTRACT

A number of changes have been initiated in Washington State public schools in recent years. Policymakers and the public assume that principals have the capacity to lead the implementation of many reforms and regulations while carrying out a variety of responsibilities. This paper presents findings of a survey of Washington State principals to investigate whether the role of the principal has been changing, and if so, to identify the reasons for and implications of those changes. Data were obtained from 2 surveys mailed to the 2,431 members of the Association of Washington State Principals (AWSP). One survey was sent to principals and assistant principals with less than 5 years of experience, and the other elicited the view of more experienced site administrators. A total of 487 questionnaires were returned by more experienced principals and 133 were received from those with less experience, for a response rate of 34.6 percent. Data from the less-experienced principals are not reported in this paper. In general, the principals believed that their responsibilities had changed during the last 5 years. Ninety-one percent of the principals indicated they were in districts that were decentralizing decision making to the local school site. 74 percent were initiating or encouraging the use of site councils, and 79 percent indicated the need to establish school-business partnerships. These changes were in addition to new responsibilities created by the state with regard to educational reform, truancy reporting, and special education. Seventy-six percent reported that they worked in sites with increased student diversity. 81 percent indicated that interactions with parents increased, more frequently with parents, and 91 percent reported the importance of considering "client satisfaction" when making decisions. The degree of change also varied by rural/urban region and by school level. The changes resulted in several themes or trends: (1) additional responsibilities that did not always come with the corresponding authority; (2) a shift from leadership to management; (3) ambiguous and complex new responsibilities; and (4) a decline in morale and enthusiasm. (LMC)

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The Changing Role of the Principal in Washington State

Richard Williams & Bradley Portin
University of Washington

Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
College of Education
Box 353600
Seattle, WA 98195-3600

Telephone: (206) 543-1836
Fax: (206) 543-8439
E-mail: bportin@u.washington.edu
rwill@u.washington.edu

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a number of changes have been initiated in Washington State public schools. These have included: increased intensity of existing programs, i.e., implementing federal and special education laws; state-initiated changes, i.e., adopting of state curriculum standards, and accompanying assessments; district-initiated changes, e.g., decentralizing decision making from the school district to local school sites. Importantly, these changes are being implemented at a time when many districts and schools are experiencing considerable shifts in their populations' ethnic and socio-economic composition, and when many families are struggling to meet the challenges resulting from divorce, unemployment, or when both parents are fully employed.

Much attention has been given to the impact these changes and the shifting contexts of public education are having on teachers, parents, and students, and the responsibilities each of these groups has in implementing changes and adjusting to contextual shifts. It is assumed by policy makers, parents, teachers and the public that principals have the capacity to lead and supervise the implementation of these many programs and regulations, and continue to provide previously assigned responsibilities, e.g., provide instructional leadership, manage resources, assure a safe school environment, and respond to parent and community requests.

A number of studies completed on the role of the principal, and the barriers to principals serving as instructional leaders suggest the public's expectations might not be realized (See for example: Kowalski, 1979; Morris et al., 1984; Peterson, 1984; Murphy 1990; Evans 1994) As noted in the literature, numerous factors have been identified that contribute to the ways in which principals spend their time, e.g., constant interruptions, lack of planning time, fragmentation of activities, compliance with numerous rules and regulations

The leaders of the Association of Washington State Principals (AWSP) have long been aware of the complexity of the principal's role. However, recently they began sensing that principals were increasingly expressing concerns that their capacity and willingness to respond to new pressures and responsibilities was reaching the breaking point. More and more members were voicing concerns about continuing in the profession, and the number of applicants for principal vacancies in the state, especially at the high school level, was declining. Unsure about how wide spread these concerns were and the reasons for this apparent escalation in principal expressions of disconcent, the Association established an Advisory Committee on the Changing Role of the Principalship to explore the member's viewpoints regarding whether the role of the principalship in Washington State has been changing if so, the reasons for those changes, and the implications of those changes. The authors agreed to work with the Committee in designing that study. This paper describes the AWSP study (Williams and Portin, 1997).

THE RESEARCH STUDY.

The AWSP study was conducted in two stages.

The first stage, conducted by Kevin Wulff (a local high school principal) in 1995, consisted of a series of focus-group discussions with school principals from around the state. The focus group discussions identified several issues and topics, which provided an initial list of topics to be considered for this study.

The Advisory Committee, wanting to obtain a more comprehensive view of its members' views of the principalship asked us to design a study that would survey the opinions of all its members. Subsequently, an initial questionnaire was developed, reviewed and revised by the Advisory Committee

Members, and field tested in a school district. This resulted in a final 55-item questionnaire that was used in the study reported here.

Two questionnaires were sent to the entire AWSP membership. One questionnaire, was filled out only by those principals and assistant principals with less than 5 years experience--it asked questions about the reasons they chose to become principals, what they found rewarding about being a principal, and the kinds of help and support AWSP could provide them in their work. That study is not reported in this paper.

The questionnaire used in this study asked for the respondents' perceptions about ways in which the principalship had changed during the past five years. Accordingly, it was filled out only by those principals and assistant principals who had been site administrators for five years or more. Only the results of this second study are reported in this paper.

The Questionnaire

Some questionnaire items asked for a "yes" or "no" response. For example:

"Has your school district delegated to your school more decision-making responsibility than was the case five years ago?"
Yes *No*

Most of the questionnaire items asked for a response on a 5-point Likert Scale (strongly agree; agree; undecided; disagree; strongly disagree) to a statement.

For example: "Overall, decentralized decision-making has had a positive impact on my school."
Strongly agree agree undecided disagree strongly disagree.

Respondents were asked to respond only to those sections of the questionnaire that were relevant to their situation. For example, only those who responded "yes" to the above question about delegating decision making were asked to respond to additional questions about ways in which this trend to delegate decision making in their district might have impacted their role as a principal.

Respondents were categorized by the level at which they currently served as an administrator (elementary, middle or junior high school, high school); and by district type (rural, suburban, urban.)

The questionnaire was divided into nine topics. The initial list of topics was selected from issues that emerged in Kevin Wulff's study; the final list of nine topics was selected by the AWSP Advisory Committee. Eight topics explored the impact selected policies or practices might be having on the schools and the principalship. The ninth topic explored the respondents opinion on ways changes in the principalship might be impacting their personal and professional lives. The nine topics were:

1. Delegated decision making from the district to the school site

2. The state Educational Reform Act of 1992 (known as HB 1209)

3. The "Becca Bill," a legislated state program to reduce truancy that requires schools to determine each day which student absences are excused, to take prescribed steps to report students who are unexcused, and, if student attendance does not improve, to accompany students to a judicial hearing

4. Increased student and community diversity
5. Site-based decision making
6. Parent interactions with the school
7. Special education programs
8. School and Community Relations
9. Personal and professional impact

A total of 2431 questionnaires were mailed to the AWSP membership. A total of 687 questionnaires were returned from experienced principals and assistant principals; 153 were returned from principals and assistant principals with less than five years experience. This resulted in a 34.6 percent response rate. This response rate is lower than one would desire, and should be kept in mind when considering the findings that follow. An analysis of the returns, however, indicates that the returns represented the proportionality of the membership, that is the percentage of respondents by level and district type represented the AWSP membership. The survey results were summarized and appropriate statistical tests were used to determine if significant differences existed among the various categories of respondent.

For reporting in this paper, the "agree" and "strongly agree", as well as the "disagree" and "strongly disagree" categories were combined. A more detailed analysis of the strength of agreement or disagreement is being considered.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The following questions are each related to perceived changes in the last five years and were answered only by those who have held positions as principals and assistant principals for that period of time.

Delegation of decision-making: district to school

- Delegation of decision-making from the district to school has occurred on a wide scale, as indicated by 91% of respondents. This delegation has required a significant reprioritization of time (86% Agree/Strongly Agree).
- Generally, respondents indicate that there is support from the teaching staff for decentralized decision-making (79% Agree/Strongly Agree) and that it has had a positive impact on the school (73% Agree/Strongly Agree).
- However, 71% of those affected by changes in decentralized decision-making indicated that the parameters of the their decision-making authority have not been clearly established. This is especially so for urban respondents (indicated by 83% of urban respondents).
- Generally, there was a positive response to the effect from HB 1209. 65% feel it has enhanced their ability to provide instructional leadership, that it has had a positive effect on the instructional program (76%), and the SLIBGs[1] (Student Learning Improvement Block Grants) have been worth the administrative time (81%).

[1] Student Learning Improvement Block Grants: Funds schools apply for to enable the implementation of state curriculum frameworks.

- The strength of response drops when considering the long-term influence of HB 1209. 65% feel that it will significantly influence the direction of education by the year 2000; 35% disagree or are uncertain of the long-term influence.

Truancy/"Becca Bill"

- The strength of response was quite striking. Compliance with the bill is a requiring significant, and disproportionate amount of time (79% Agree/Strongly Agree), and coordination with other authorities has been demanding challenge (65% Agree/Strongly Agree).
- The challenges associated with the administration of this bill are primarily an urban and suburban issue at the secondary level. Elementary and rural schools are impacted, but not to the same degree.
- Only 26% feel that the Becca Bill has provided them with the added authority needed to address the problem of truancy, and 87% disagree or are undecided about the bill's ability to address the problem of truancy when fully operational.

Student diversity issues

- Breadth of student diversity (defined as ethnic, economic, social, language groups) has changed in a way that has had an important impact on the school (76% Agree/Strongly Agree).
- Impact of the change has been on the scope (92% Agree / Strongly Agree) and complexity of administrative responsibility, (89% Agree/Strongly Agree), in addition to disproportionate time demands (81% Agree/Strongly Agree).
- Student diversity is complex in all types of districts, although urban and suburban see the greatest positive impact.

School site councils

- 76% of respondents indicated their districts have encouraged or directed the establishment of site councils (highest for urban schools 92% and suburban schools 88%).
- Site councils are seen to have a positive effect on the school (65% Agree/Strongly Agree), although the link to improving student learning is unclear (43% undecided).
- As in the section on delegated decision making, 54% indicated that the roles, process, and responsibilities of site councils have not been clearly articulated by the district.

Interactions with parents

- 83% indicated that interactions with parents have increased in a moderate to significant manner.
- This increased interaction and participation by parents in the school program has been perceived as welcomed by teachers (65% Agree/Strongly Agree), has led to more programs being offered (63% Agree/Strongly Agree), and has benefited the school (67% Agree/Strongly Agree).
- The greatest parent involvement appears to occur at the elementary level in suburban schools.
- Another aspect of parent involvement has been the time demands (61% indicating that it takes a disproportionate amount of time) and a large increase in the time has been associated with mediating conflicts between and among students, parents and staff (82% Agree/Strongly Agree).

Special education programs

- 70% of respondents indicate that special education programs have been more difficult to implement than most school programs and take a disproportionate amount of time (77% Agree/Strongly Agree).
- There appear to be greater numbers of students requiring special education services (90% Agree/Strongly Agree).
- 51% Disagree/Strongly Disagree with the statement that inclusion programs are allowing the school to meet the needs of all students. (26% Agree/Strongly Agree, and 23% Undecided).
- Changes in special education funding levels have made it necessary to reallocate regular education resources (77% Agree/Strongly Agree, especially so in urban schools).

School and the external community

- More time is being spent planning for issues of public relations and presentation of the school to the external community (83% Agree/Strongly Agree), this is especially so for suburban schools (88% Agree/Strongly Agree). Increasingly, client satisfaction is seen as the crucial outcome of decision-making (91% Agree/Strongly Agree).
- More time and attention is being directed toward the marketing of schools to attract and retain students (74% Agree/Strongly Agree), this is particular so for high schools (82% Agree/Strongly Agree).
- All schools indicated the importance of establishing business partnerships (79% Agree/Strongly Agree), this is particularly the case for urban high schools (91% Agree/Strongly Agree).

Impact on principal's and assistant principals

- Principals and A.P.s are working more hours (91% Agree/Strongly Agree). The highest response was from urban principals and A.P.s. Seeking external funding sources was indicated as an increased priority (62% Agree/Strongly Agree); and issues of student safety and security were demanding more time (93% Agree/Strongly Agree).
- Personally, they feel more confident in their abilities (65% Agree/Strongly Agree), but more frustrated (73% Agree/Strongly Agree); only 36% felt more enthusiastic about their job than five years ago.
- There are mixed feelings about the desire for more decision-making delegated to the school (46% Agree/Strongly Agree; 54% Undecided, Disagree/Strongly Disagree).
- Increased managerial responsibilities are affecting the respondents' ability to provide instructional leadership and staff development (81% Agree/Strongly Agree).
- 72% would choose to become a principal/A.P. given the choice again.

CONCLUSIONS

As a general conclusion, it is clear that the principals feel that there have indeed been changes during the last five years in the responsibilities for which they are accountable. Ninety-one percent of the principals indicated they are in districts that are decentralizing decision making to the local school site, 76 per cent were in districts that were initiating or encouraging the use of site councils, 79 per cent indicated the need to establish school/business partnerships. These shifts are in addition to the responsibilities all principals have assumed under the provisions of state educational reform, truancy, and special education legislation.

These additional responsibilities are being assumed in a shifting context. Seventy-six percent reported working in sites with increased student diversity that has had an important impact on the school, 83 per cent increased interactions with parents that have had a significant impact on their work, 91 per cent reported it was important to consider "client satisfaction" when making decisions.

Clearly the added responsibilities and shifting contexts described above are not reported by the same percentage of all principals. As was noted, some of the impacts are more concentrated in some settings than others, e.g., the impact of the "Becca Bill" is more often reported by urban and suburban principals than rural principals, and by high school and middle school principals than elementary principals. More elementary principals report favorable faculty response to parental involvement in the school than do secondary principals. Each principal has his or her own specific profile as regards the impact of the changes and the contexts. Still, it is clear that as a general observation, the role of the principal in Washington State has indeed changed in important ways.

As we interpret the data, several themes or trends emerge.

1. ***Layering***. Each of the changes noted above require the principal to take on additional responsibilities; these responsibilities are "layered" one on top of the other. This is often reported as taking a "disproportionate amount of time." We interpret this as meaning that the task or responsibility under consideration demands enough time and attention that the principal must reduce the time and attention given to other necessary responsibilities. At the same time, the principals have not been relieved of the other duties and responsibilities that have traditionally been a part of their job, e.g., building maintenance and repair, instructional leadership, maintaining a safe and secure environment, responding to teacher and staff requests, conducting legally required teacher evaluations, managing the budget, and maintaining discipline.

   The layering of responsibility does not always come with the corresponding authority. Whereas a school may have the added responsibility of a site council for local decisions, that decision making is often constrained by state legislation, district policy, and negotiated agreements with bargaining units. The responses suggest that this is one of the pressures which principals and assistant principals feel with layered responsibility.

2. ***Shift from leadership to management.*** We find it useful to think of the principal's role as being a balance between leadership and management. Leadership covers the important role of supervising the curriculum, improving the instructional program, working with the staff to identify a vision and direction for the school, building a close and congruent working relationship between the school and its community. Management, which is also important, includes managing the budget, maintaining the building, completing and submitting required reports, complying with legislative mandates and state and district regulations. Because the management tasks are often more explicit, and because not complying with them becomes very visible to district administrators and can have legal consequences, it is understandable that principals give high priority to attending to managerial responsibilities, often at the expense of leadership responsibilities. There simply is not enough time to do both.

3. ***Ambiguity and complexity.*** These changes and additional responsibilities often are accompanied by considerable ambiguity, as regards the principals' responsibilities. As noted, many principals view districts as decentralizing decision making to the local school without clear guidelines about which responsibilities rest with the principal and which remain with the district. This same lack of clarity exists with regard to district instructions to utilize site councils. Some principals report they lack the necessary skills required for success in some aspects of the changing role, e.g., marketing the school, dealing with an increasingly diverse school population. The complexity comes from trying to balance these diverse and new responsibilities in a context of increasingly critical constituencies.

4. ***Declining morale and enthusiasm.*** Many of the principals reported feeling greater frustration, less secure, and less enthusiastic about their work. It is important to note that these attitudes do not reflect an attitude that these changes are unnecessary, or that they wish to return to some "golden age." For the most part they welcome these changes, as evidenced by their enthusiastic embrace of the Washington State School Reform effort, their general support of greater parent involvement in the schools, their recognition of the benefits of decentralized decision making. A noted exception to their support of these changes is their skepticism about the "Becca Bill".

Their decline in morale and enthusiasm stems, instead, from their inability to carry out both their management and leadership functions effectively and efficiently, and their preference to provide leadership. One response to the additional "layering" of duties has been for them to work longer hours. Many principals report work weeks of 50 to 70 hours. This, of course, takes its toll in both their professional and personal lives. Many are reaching the limit of the number of hours they can, or are willing to devote to the job and they are being forced to make choices about where they will spend their time and attention.

Another source of frustration is the shift to managerial rather than leadership responsibilities. While they recognize that managing the building is a necessary function for principals, they get great satisfaction out of their role as instructional leaders, spending time with teachers, students, and parents in improving the schools' program and student learning. Yet many find it increasingly difficult to fulfill that role because of the more immediate managerial responsibilities that press down on them.

Another source of frustration, which surfaced in Kevin Wulff's study and in discussions with principals when planning this study, is the seeming lack of appreciation principals feel for the contributions they are making in the schools, as evidenced by the lid placed on administrator salaries. They sense a popular attitude that administrators, are a major impediment to school improvement and that school reform would flourish if we just got rid of principals. What principals find missing in the public debate about school improvements is appreciation that the many changes that are taking place in our schools carry with them mandated administrative responsibilities and duties. Principals are working long hours, dealing with considerable frustration and complexity. They would like to be thought of as important partners, with teachers, central administrators, and policy makers in efforts to improve the schools in Washington State.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our intent in this study was to gain greater understanding of what principals mean when they say, "My job as a principal has changed in significant ways."

Principals play a critically important role in the schooling system–there is little chance of school improvement without principal leadership. Surprisingly, their voice is seldom heard in school reform discussions. Parents, teacher associations, legislators, district administrators, school board members politicians all participate vigorously in the school reform debates. It is assumed that principals will be able to absorb the additional duties thrust upon them by reformers, and will do so in an increasingly

complex environment. Our purpose here was to give a "voice" to principals–to allow them to express their views on how various school reforms and the changing environment surrounding schools are impacting their personal and professional lives.

Several messages seem very clear and, because of the critical role principals play in our schooling system, it would seem imperative that various audiences listen to what these principals are saying:

- **The legislature**. Clearly the principals view HB 1209, the state education reform legislation with considerable enthusiasm. It would seem important to continue to support the reform movement. The "Becca Bill" on the other hand has little support, and the principals do not feel that it will be successful in achieving its goal of reducing truancy. It would seem important to look closely at the legislation and examine the basis for the principals' concerns.

- **School boards and district administrators**. While the principals seem to support the movement to decentralize decision making to the local site, they are asking for clear guidelines regarding the extent of their responsibilities. The same applies to the establishment of site councils–who is responsible for what? Clearly the principals are saying that they are approaching the limits of the amount of time they can dedicate to the job. Those who are proposing additional changes that will impact the school and the principal's role should realize that for many principals, their capacity to take on additional duties is severely limited. In addition to the time restraints, the principals, because of external priorities, are increasingly becoming managers rather than instructional leaders. If this trend continues, we all will have to address the question, "Who will provide leadership to our schools?"

Finally to everyone, policy makers, district administrators, parents, school staffs, and the public, the principals are seeking some appreciation for the very difficult and demanding leadership responsibilities they are carrying. They work very long hours, often experience considerable conflict from various groups that insist that their demands be met. They find the specific responsibilities of their job are becoming increasingly ambiguous as they assume tasks never before required of them. Nonetheless, a large percentage, at least at this time, seem quite prepared to continue providing leadership for our schools.

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